

sight lines

WELCOME

BACK,

PICTURE

PHONE?



the telephone probably ranks with television and the computer as one of the most significant devices of the 20th century — at least, in terms of its impact on the way we work and play. It's no surprise, then, that a good many articles have been written to assess the future of this device.

Most of them were remarkably correct — except when it came to one potential use they all predicted.

YESTERDAY

In the 1950s, when computer technology was first being integrated into telephone networks, all kinds of new possibilities were presented to the research scientists at organizations such as Bell Labs and Northern Telecom.

Consider the August, 1958, *Popular Mechanics* article, “Miracles Ahead on Your Telephone.” It suggested that

telephones of the future would include “loudspeakers” (speakerphones), the ability to send calls automatically to another number (call forwarding) and a special “talk back” capability to let callers leave a message (voice mail). The article also envisioned a “robot watchdog” linked to your telephone that would call the police, fire department or other contact should a problem be detected in the home — today’s burglar alarm system.

Such accuracy in prediction was quite typical. In the mid-1950s, there were

widespread reports about the “push-button phone of the future.” There were also many articles — such as the one in *Changing Times* in May, 1960 — predicting the day would come when most people would be able to dial telephone numbers anywhere in the world. The same article also forecast that, one day, businesses would use telephones for “transmitting drawings, blueprints, balance sheets ...” (today’s fax machine) and said that “the ultimate in phones would be a “carry-it-with-you instrument” (the cellphone).

All these articles made one further prediction, and that was the one that gained the most attention — the concept of the videophone. The otherwise-accurate *Changing Times* piece said a small TV would soon be found in the typical telephone, so that “you won’t have to guess who’s calling — you’ll be able to see for yourself.”

The videophone wasn’t just a concept. Demonstration models were built and gained a huge degree of attention. The 1964 World’s Fair in New York saw the launch of AT&T’s PicturePhone — a device consisting of a telephone handset and a small, matching TV. Suddenly, video telephones were to be real and accessible to everyone.

That is, anyone with a deep pocket. AT&T first set up the phones in public buildings in New York, Washington and

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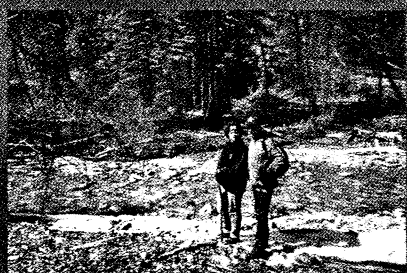
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TIME TRAVEL

speed telecommunication lines necessary for video conferences. Certainly this technology is not yet widely available to the average citizen.

TOMORROW

Will we ever see the concept of the PicturePhone revived? Two factors suggest that it's possible.

First, expect technologies that will let us receive huge amounts of data in our home, a necessity for a crystal-clear PicturePhone call. It is said that researchers at Northern Telecom, AT&T and elsewhere have figured out how to send the entire *Encyclopedia Britannica* from coast to coast in three seconds. That type of telecommunication capability, available to the home at inexpensive rates, would make the PicturePhone a practical reality.

Second, there is constant innovation in Silicon Valley, with companies working on ways for people to use their existing telephones for video conferencing. Take InfoView, a small California firm. They've developed a small camera device that sits on top of your television. Plug it into your telephone and TV, and the long-lost promise of the PicturePhone has suddenly reappeared. Dial a friend who also has an Infoview, press a button and the two of you are doing a PicturePhone-type call. The most fascinating thing? The device costs U.S.\$399 — a fraction of the cost of other telephone-based videoconferencing systems available to individuals today.

Perhaps the PicturePhone itself will be revived, proving that the concept itself was right — just 30 years or so ahead of its time. ■

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Chicago, charging people \$21 (about U.S.\$111 in 1999 dollars) to make a three-minute PicturePhone call. Soon, the company began to introduce it into the corporate world.

At the time, most people seemed to assume that broader use was imminent, and they imagined even more sophisticated devices to come. *Science Digest* in March, 1965, noted talk of an "ultimate telephone," the size of a pack of cigarettes, that would carry both voice and video and could be used anywhere. A cellphone videophone!

TODAY

In fact, the PicturePhone died a quick death soon after its introduction and video conferencing is still a marginal activity in the corporate world. Technology companies have struggled for years to come up with some type of television-based telephone system but the results, until recently, have been disappointing or very expensive.

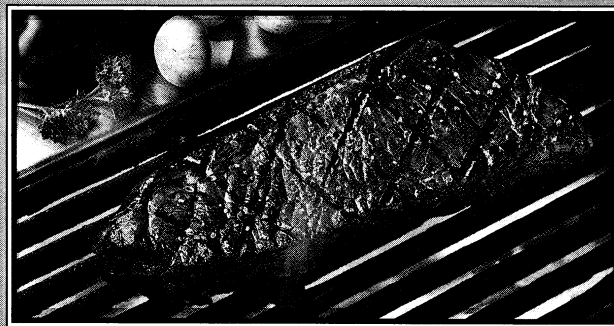
The biggest problem is quite simple — global telecommunication systems just haven't been equipped to handle the huge volumes of data that this

technology requires. The August, 1958, issue of *Popular Mechanics* was bang on when it noted: "one hurdle to practical TV phones is the amount of electronic information necessary for transmitting voice and picture..." To a degree, that hurdle is still with us today.

Yes, you can find video-conferencing equipment in the offices of many major corporations, but it's costly. Many of those companies have spent upwards of \$15,000 to equip their boardrooms with the cameras, audio equipment and high-

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